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Try It: A Bold Move in Cultivating the Change Process

By Dr. Anthony P. Barber



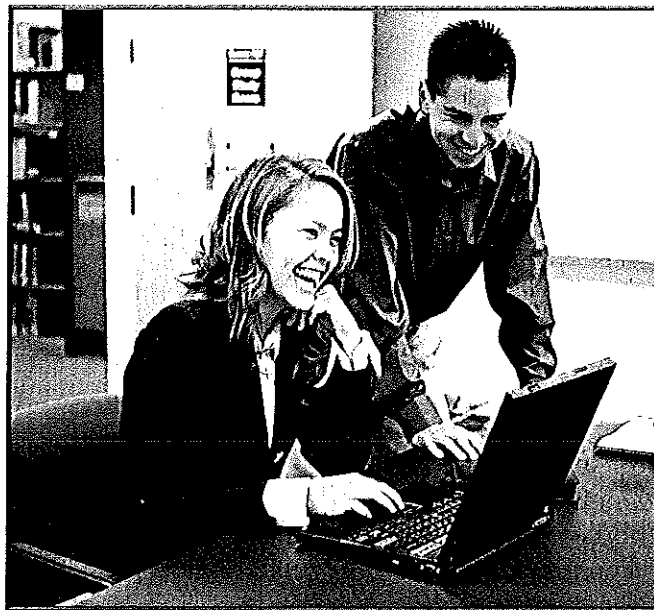
About the Author: Anthony P. Barber, Ed.D., is the director of teaching and learning in the Springfield School District, a growing suburban school just outside of Philadelphia. As such, he is in constant contact with teachers and school staff facing the very issues that are addressed in this article. Dr. Barber was an English teacher and also a former assistant principal and principal.

On a professional level, Dr. Barber has earned a master's degree in education and a doctorate in educational leadership from Widener University. He has taught at several universities, instructing potential principals and potential teachers. He was nominated for the Pennsylvania Assistant Principal of the Year in 2003 and again for the Pennsylvania Principal of the Year in 2009. He has presented at numerous conferences and educational seminars on topics such as leadership, motivation and transition.

On a personal level, he is married to his wife, Denise, and they have three children Brett, age 9, Braden, age 6 and Bradley, age 4.

Remember that cute 1970's commercial for Life cereal with little Mikey? His brothers were resistant to try the new cereal which was "supposed to be good for you." Being clever, as siblings can be, they passed the bowl to their little brother, Mikey. As fate would have it, Mikey tried it, and Mikey liked it! "Nutritious and delicious." What a concept!

Now whether or not you can recall this cute, but effective ad, hopefully the concept resonates -- taste tests work! Recently, I attended a colleague's faculty meeting. He was presenting useful reading strategies to his staff. (Or so that is what he said.) Once in the meeting, the lights dimmed, the PowerPoint brightened and the principal began to talk... and talk....and talk. Instead of sharing the reading strategies with his staff (or better yet, tagging a staff member to be the expert), he presented the research. Tons of it! The entire premise was a call for "Every teacher a reading teacher," and his mission was to convince his staff of this "moral imperative." A valuable tenet, but the weary looks told the story -- the staff had checked out.



Have you ever attended a meeting like this? Or worse, have you ever been the presenter? I know I was plenty of times until I was introduced to a simple concept.

When educators can step out of the educational world, we can learn so much. For example, you have all been to a supermarket and had someone offer you a stick of cheese. Free samples! Sometimes it tastes good; other times not, but the risk to reward factor makes it prosperous. "Free" works, especially with a new product.

Now, picture the cheese lady instead of offering cheese, dispensing volumes of literature about cheese. Facts about how their product is so much better. Four out of five doctors recommend it. Blah. Blah. Blah. As the consumer, you are less likely to stop for literature because the risk to reward is low. "I am not here to read. I am here to eat!"

How does this short vignette relate to us as educational leaders? When we start with the research, we sometimes become the cheese lady without cheese. Have you ever heard a teacher say, "Just tell me what you want me to do?" And yet, as "instructional leaders," we tend to view these simple requests as antagonistic or detached. We outfox ourselves by demonstrating our expertise through degrees of documentation. We wallpaper our hallways with slogans of "Every teacher a reading teacher," only to create the same eye-rolling reaction that you would give to the cheese lady with her healthy handouts.

Continued on next page

Culture, by definition, depicts the way we do what we do in a society (Clabaugh and Rozycki, 1990). Culture exists on three levels: technical, formal and informal (Hall, 1959). On the technical level, people do things because they *work*. For example, when starting a car, we put the key into the ignition gauge not for fun, but because we want the car to start. Key in; engine on. It works!

On the formal level, people do things because they are *right* for them. An example of formal culture is that habitual jaunt to Starbucks every Friday. We chose this pattern because it is right for us. Formal culture requires negotiation because it is "tied to feelings and resistant to change" (Clabaugh and Rozycki, 1990). In other words, trying to break the pattern of your venti vanilla cappuccino may not be as easy as you think, especially if it is made with soy and a smidgen of whipped cream. *Delightful!*

The informal culture is non-existent to us until the formal culture is broken by a change. For instance, imagine the first person to wear his baseball cap to the side. That is informal culture, representing a "shock" to the formal system. Informal culture becomes formal when people start to acknowledge the change. As others start to wear their hats to the side, the actions becomes normal -- a change in accepted behavior.

Educational experts sometimes foil their own expertise by relying too much on the anticipated argument (formal) and far too less on the attainable action (technical).

Please note, I am not saying that sound research and data analysis should not precipitate and continue to support change. On the contrary, I am saying precisely that...only do the research first, select a few workable ideas that you want to have tried and then let the staff test them in a non-threatening environment.

Even the greatest research in the world has to take into account context; meaning just because it "was right" for one school, does not mean it can transfer to another seamlessly. Forcing one way for people to "do something" brings with it the idea that this is the cor-

rect way. In being correct, all others must be incorrect. When we allow our teachers the chance to try and experiment, we allow culture to do what it

does...guide us on ways to function within the given society.

Skillful leaders set the stage by offering the professionals a chance to be just that -- professional. For instance, instead of my friend's faculty meeting, imagine if

this correspondence was e-mailed to the staff:

"Good morning everyone. Our data team is noticing some negative trends in our data when it comes to making inferences. For our next department meeting, can we work together to brainstorm some of the ways that you handle this in your classroom? If we can all bring one or two strategies to share, that would be terrific. And if you do not have one -- no worries. That's why we are a team. See you all at 3:00 p.m. I'll bring the pretzels."

Quite a different approach than starting with the assumption that no one knows what they are doing. Now, if you do get to the meeting and see the ideas are limited, then bring in the cavalry. However, my gut is that someone will "have it" and be willing to share. As the discourse commences, the strategies become a focal point for teamwork and cooperation. Perhaps you can ask a few people to model it in their classrooms. Try it out; see if it works, and report back to the staff on the next meeting day. Perhaps the ones that work will be copied and repeated by others. Don't look now, but every teacher is starting to become a teacher of reading.

I tend to refer to our teachers as independent contractors. I do not mean to say these people are not team-oriented or collaborative. Indeed, there are fantastic teams that plan together and are consistent in their approach to curriculum, instruction and assessment. However, our teams are not working with widgets; different students present different challenges and opportunities. We have to possess the forethought to plan before crisis occurs by allowing our teachers the chance to test actions prior to believing lock, stock and barrel. In a sense, you are not putting the cart in front of the horse, only allowing the con-

Continued on page 23

Figure 1: The First Cohort of EDK Results

Student	Reading	Math	Comments
A	Proficient	Advanced	Progressed very well
B	Proficient	Proficient	Progressed very well
C	Proficient	Proficient	Progressed very well
D	Below Basic	Below Basic	IST and IEP
E	Proficient	Proficient	Progressed very well
F	Proficient	Basic	Continues to be borderline in math and is getting additional help
G	Proficient	Proficient	Progressed very well
H	Proficient	Proficient	Progressed very well
I	Below Basic	Basic	IST and IEP
J	Proficient	Proficient	Progressed very well
K	Proficient	Basic	Continues to be borderline in math and is getting additional help
L	Proficient	Advanced	Progressed very well
M	Basic	Below Basic	IST and IEP

Try It: A Bold Move in Cultivating the Change Process

Continued from page 19

sumer a chance to sample what is in the cart prior to setting it in motion.

I do admit this theory works best when teams are not in crisis. For those moments, a leader may have to make a command decision. In non-crisis situations, we have the benefit of time, which allows us to "try" different approaches. To stay with our analogy, if you need to pick up napkins for a party for which you are extremely late, you may not have time to try the cheese. The taste test works best with shoppers (non-specific time frame) rather than buyers (specific, targeted time frame).

Research is used to "win" arguments. If someone is starting with research, perhaps the hidden message to the listener is one of anticipated disagreement. It seems so easy, but then so is handing out

free cheese, and yet, there lies the brilliance of the innovation.

To transform culture, change has to be good for the individual as well as the organization.

Formal culture is negotiated, meaning that sustained society changes occur when the majority of people deem the action to be worth sustaining. To do this well, we as educational leaders, must be open to disagreement and variation. We must embrace the antithesis of our beliefs so long as the desired outcomes are reached for the good of all.

Perhaps Mikey's brothers would have made exceptional administrators. Perhaps there is a little bit of Mikey in all of us. By allowing our teachers to grab their spoons and

dig into different approaches, different ideas, we build professional development that is founded on choice, motivation and what works! In your next professional development session, try using make and takes, share-fests and conference-like set ups, where differentiation is the norm. Allow the *grassroots* (informal culture) to cultivate the change process by trusting your staff to use what works for them. "Nutritious and delicious!" *Bon appetit!*

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